

SYRIA'S ALIGNMENT WITH IRAN AND EFFORTS TO
ENCOURAGE SYRIAN DEFECTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, Syria and Iran have maintained a strategic alliance. Syria supported Iran throughout the Iran-Iraq war and Iran has been one of Syria's strongest supporters in the conflict with Israel. Throughout this period, the alliance has endured attempts by other Arab states, Israel, and the US to delink Syria from Iran. The purpose of this research is to examine the Syrian-Iranian alliance in an effort to understand its strength and the failure of efforts to draw Syria away from Iran. It explores the nature and strength of the alliance within a neorealist framework of alliance formation and continuation, emphasizing the complexity of the international system and the importance of actors' perceptions of external and domestic threats. The study identifies several factors that played a role in the formation of the alliance and that have contributed to its continuation, and discusses each of them in detail. It also examines the specific efforts that have been made to delink Syria from Iran, and discusses why these efforts have been insufficient. This research concludes that the strength of their relationship is largely the product of their dependence on one another to meet their security objectives, and demonstrates that even during times of economic weakness when defection seemed most likely, Syria was able to overlook its economic needs in order to continue cooperating with Iran on security issues. This study also demonstrates that Syria's relationship with Iran and its links to Hezbollah and the Palestinian rejectionist

groups are its primary bargaining tools in the conflict with Israel. Thus, it is unlikely that Syria will give up its relationship with Iran as a precondition to peace negotiations.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Historical Overview

The victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 was not received well by most of the authoritarian regimes in the region, many of whom faced Islamist opposition movements within their own borders and feared a possible spillover effect.¹ Consequently, the regimes in Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt were reluctant to recognize the regime of Khomeini out of fear that to do so would legitimate the ideology of the Islamic revolution. They were also frightened by the effect that a radical Shi'i regime could have on the stability of other states in the region with large Shi'i population, particularly Lebanon and Iraq. The Iraqi Foreign Minister conveyed the insecurities of the Ba'athist regime when he stated that "Iran's internal affairs concern the Iranian people only."² Likewise, Jordan's King Hussein had previously condemned Khomeini as a heretic. The Syrian regime of Hafiz al-Asad, on the other hand, responded with a

¹ *The New York Times* published an article on Feb. 24, 1979 entitled "Iranian Leaders Consider Egypt Ripe for Islamic Uprising". The article was based on several interviews with important figures in the new Iranian regime in which they portrayed Arab nationalism as being outdated and spoke of a "new era" of Islamic struggle. They stated that Sadat's regime in Egypt was likely to be the next to succumb to an Islamist revolution given economic and political parallels between Sadat's regime and the Shah's regime. *The New York Times* published another article on May 25, 1979 entitled "Striking Similarities to Situation in Iran Causing Concern to Indonesian Regime" that demonstrates the extent to which the fear of a spillover effect reached.

² Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 18.

surprising amount of enthusiasm and support, despite being involved in a heavy handed campaign against the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. On February 12, 1979, the day after the final collapse of the Shah's government, Syria became the first Arab state to recognize the new Iranian regime and Asad sent a telegram to Khomeini declaring his "support for the new regime created by the revolution in Iran," and stating that, "this regime is in the Iranian people's greatest interest, as well as that of the Arabs and the Muslims."³ Rif'at al-Asad, the President's brother and the commander of the Syrian defense brigades, sent envoys to Iran immediately following the revolution to talk about ways in which the two states could cooperate in order to meet their individual security and economic needs. This was followed in March by a visit to Iran by Ahmad Iskander Ahmad, the Syrian Information Minister, where he gave Khomeini an illuminated Qur'an as a gift from Hafiz al-Asad. In August, Syria's Foreign Minister, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, made a personal visit to Tehran during which he declared that the Iranian revolution was "the most important event in our contemporary history."⁴

While in Tehran, Khaddam also asserted that Syria had been supportive of Iranian revolutionaries long before the outbreak of the revolution. Asad's regime had, in fact, provided assistance to many of the leading figures of the revolution, including Ibrahim Yazdi, Mustafa Chamran, Sadeq Qotbzadeh, and Khomeini himself. Qotbzadeh, who became the Iranian Foreign Minister after the revolution, had been given a Syrian passport which allowed him to conduct revolutionary activities from Damascus; and Khomeini was given refuge in Syria after Saddam Hussein had expelled him from Najaf in October, 1978, before his move to Paris and subsequent return to Iran the following

³ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 18.

⁴ Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1989) 353.

February.⁵ In addition, the Lebanese Shi'i militia, Amal, which was supported by Syria, had been training Iranian revolutionaries since 1976.⁶

Since coming to power in 1970, Asad's relationship with the Shah had been troubled. He understood, however, that a relationship with Iran could be to his benefit and he had hoped to be able to utilize the Shah's positive relationship with the United States to produce a more favorable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In December 1975, Asad visited Tehran to meet with the Shah. Their meeting resulted in a joint statement calling on Israel to withdraw "from all the Arab territories occupied in June 1967".⁷ Despite this, the Shah continued to support Anwar Sadat's pursuit of a separate peace with Israel, maintained covert ties with Israel, and continued to comply with American interests in the region. It soon became clear to Asad that the Shah was not willing to risk his ties with Israel and the United States by supporting Syria. When the Camp David Accords were signed in September 1978, Syria lost its most important ally in the Arab-Israeli conflict and sought briefly to reconcile with Iraq in order to balance against the Israeli threat. This rapprochement was short lived, however, and by the middle of 1979 Syria's relations with Iraq had deteriorated significantly.⁸ Within this context of Sadat's defection from the Arab-Israeli conflict and deteriorating relations with Iraq, Asad welcomed the change of regime in Iran enthusiastically.

After the revolution, Iranian relations with the Gulf states, particularly Iraq, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, began to steadily worsen. A Shi'i cleric was detained in Bahrain after returning from a

⁵ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 352-353.

⁶ Shireen T. Hunter, "Iran and Syria: From Hostility to Limited Alliance" in *Iran and the Arab World*, ed. Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 207.

⁷ Hunter, "Iran and Syria", 206-207.

⁸ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 354.

visit to Iran in the summer of 1979, resulting in Iranian accusations that the Bahraini regime was mistreating its Shi'i population and demands from Tehran that all political prisoners be released from Bahraini prisons. Furthermore, Iran conducted naval exercises in the Gulf that were interpreted by Bahrain as threatening. In response, Egypt and Iraq pledged military support to Bahrain if it were to become the victim of Iranian aggression. Throughout this incident, Asad remained loyal in his commitment to Iran and even made efforts to ease the tension by sending foreign minister Khaddam with the Iranian deputy prime minister to Manama to discuss the situation. Although any immediate threat to Bahrain was resolved at the time, Iranian relations with the Gulf states remained uneasy as both Saudi Arabia and Iraq accused Iran of inciting their Shi'i populations against them and encouraging instability within their states.⁹ Throughout the crisis with Bahrain and the deterioration of relations with Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Syria remained a steadfast Arab partner to the Islamic Republic. In fact, Syria attempted to persuade the other Arab states, with the help of Libya, to support Iran's confrontation with the US when the American embassy was seized and hostages were taken in 1979. The other Arab states, however, were unsympathetic with Iran's anti-American stance and did not wish to pose a direct challenge to American interests in the region.¹⁰

The Iranian-Syrian relationship solidified over the issue of Iraqi containment during the early 1980s. Both states felt threatened by Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and felt that their policies towards Iraq should be coordinated in order to contain it. Saddam launched his invasion of Iran in September of 1980 and began a war that carried on for eight years and was extremely costly to both countries. The Iran-Iraq War was one

⁹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 23-24.

¹⁰ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 25.

of the most important events in Syrian-Iranian relations in terms of solidifying the alliance. Whereas, before the war, Syria had been the primary beneficiary of the alliance, during the war, Iran became more dependent on Syria than ever before. Syria's aid in the war effort was instrumental in turning the tides of the war in Iran's favor, despite its ultimate failure in the end. Syria waged an economic war on Baghdad, when, in 1982 it shut down the trans-Syrian oil pipeline, effectively cutting Iraq's oil exports in half. In addition, Syria moved troops to the Iraqi border, prompting Iraq to move some of its troops from the Iranian front to the Syrian border. Perhaps the most important aspect of Syria's aid to Iran during the war was in preventing the creation of a united Arab front in opposition to Iran.¹¹

Another arena in which the Syrian-Iranian alignment proved effective was in Lebanon. Asad's consolidation of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon was one of his most significant foreign policy accomplishments and was a crucial element of his plan to avoid regional marginalization.¹² When the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, Asad intervened diplomatically at first, and then militarily as the conflict worsened in 1976. Israeli forces invaded Lebanon in 1982 in an attempt to stop Palestinian guerrillas from engaging in militant activities in northern Israel. Another purpose of the invasion was to ensure that an Israeli backed government be put in place in Lebanon that would sign a peace agreement with Israel. Asad viewed this as a direct threat to his position in Lebanon and was opposed to the prospect of a separate peace deal between Lebanon and Israel. Syria backed a paramilitary campaign against Israeli forces in Lebanon that relied heavily on Druze and Shi'i militias, including the newly formed Hezbollah. Hezbollah

¹¹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 58.

¹² Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Washington: The Brookings Institute Press, 2005), 40.

became an important recipient of support from both Syria and Iran, particularly after the Ta'if accords were concluded in 1989, which allowed Syria to maintain a military presence in Lebanon and mandated the disarming of all paramilitary organizations with the exception of Hezbollah. This arrangement allowed Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah to work together in order to keep continued pressure on Israel. Syria's relationship with Iran was largely centered on this partnership with Hezbollah throughout the 1990s until Hafiz al-Asad's death in 2000. His son, Bashar, succeeded him in the presidency and has continued Syria's alliance with Iran and provided continuing support of Hezbollah.

Syrian-Iranian relations have faced new challenges since Bashar al-Asad's ascendance to the presidency as a result of the American war on terror and the difficult peace process with Israel. In 2003, the US Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act with the stated purpose of ending Syrian support of terrorism and its occupation of Lebanon. The law specifically states that Syria has allowed a number of terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, to maintain offices and training camps in Syria and has facilitated the delivery of supplies and weapons from Iran to these organizations. The law dictated the initiation of new economic sanctions against Syria, as well as diplomatic restrictions until Syria renounced its ties with terrorist organizations and withdrew from Lebanon.¹³ In 2005, amid mounting international pressure after the assassination of Lebanese President Hariri, Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon. Despite this, Syria has continued to be involved with Hezbollah and the various Palestinian rejectionist organizations and in June 2006 signed a mutual defense

¹³ Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act of 2003.

pact with Iran that authorized the establishment of a joint Iranian-Syrian Supreme Defense Commission.¹⁴

Throughout most of Hafiz al-Asad's presidency, he insisted that any pursuit of peace with Israel must be multilateral and objected to attempts on the part of Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon to forge 'separate' peace deals. After the end of the Cold War, however, he shifted to a position that would allow for Syria to participate in bi-lateral negotiations with Israel.¹⁵ An acceptable peace deal, in Asad's eyes, included a complete Israeli withdrawal from all Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian territories. During negotiations held in 1994, 1995, 1999, and at the Clinton-Asad summit in 2000, he made it clear that the most important aspect of any peace deal was Israel's complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Furthermore, he insisted that the settlement be comprehensive with a short timetable for implementation.¹⁶ In the first decade of the 21st century, little progress has been made in regards to the peace process and Israel has demanded on several occasions that Syria cut its ties with Iran as a precondition for renewed negotiations. In May 2008, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni called for Syria to fully renounce its relationship with Iran. More recently, Israeli President Shimon Peres reportedly offered to enter into negotiations with Syria on the condition that it cut its ties with Iran and Hezbollah.¹⁷ The efforts by Israel and the US to delink Syria from Iran are directly connected to their efforts to end the terrorist activities of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the other Palestinian rejectionist groups. It is also related to their effort to isolate the

¹⁴ Bilal Y. Saab, "Syria and Iran Revive an Old Ghost with Defense Pact," *The Daily Star (Beirut)*, July 4, 2006.

¹⁵ This was the approach underscoring his participation in the Madrid peace conference in 1991.

¹⁶ Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, 46-47.

¹⁷ "Assad: Peres Promised Open Peace Talks if Syria Cuts Iran Ties," *Haaretz*, May 18, 2010.

Islamic Republic in response to its anti-Israel rhetoric and the perceived threat of its nuclear program.

Research Problem

The purpose of this research is to examine the Syrian-Iranian alliance in an effort to understand its strength and the failure of efforts to delink Syria from Iran. It will explore the nature and strength of the alliance within accepted frameworks of alliance formation and continuation, and also look at theories regarding alliance defection in order to understand the motivations behind the efforts to delink Syria from Iran, why these efforts have failed so far, and what factors and conditions may result in a future Syrian defection. The following section will discuss the analytical framework of the research project, including discussions of theories of alliance formation and alliance defection, and will also address critical analytical problems such as the role of ideology, the relevance of domestic factors, and what the unit of analysis should be, i.e. the state or the leaders of the state. The next section will discuss the Syrian-Iranian alliance within the framework previously developed in order to explain its creation and persistence and to identify the specific indicators of alliance defection that are relevant to the Syrian-Iranian case. This will be followed by a discussion of the specific efforts that have been made to delink Syria from Iran and why these efforts have been insufficient, i.e. what does Iran offer Syria that is more important than peace with Israel?

CHAPTER 2

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Explanations of Alliances

Most of the explanations of Syria's alliance with Iran are derived from realist and neorealist accounts of international relations and focus on Syria's perceptions of external threats. Classical realism understands international relations as a struggle for power. The core assumptions of the realist approach are that states are the most important actors in international politics and that they are unitary rational actors that consider the costs of alternative choices in order to maximize power. States' interests are calculated in terms of power and power is sought in both terms of influence and resources. Neorealist accounts share the assumptions that states pursue their own interests, and that these interests are defined in terms of power. However, neorealism views state behavior as being constrained by the structure of the international system, which is characterized as being anarchic and comprised of states with similar functions and interests who must use force to pursue these interests. Because power is distributed unevenly throughout the international system, weak states will align with one another in order to balance against more powerful states.¹⁸

¹⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

Balance of Threat Theory

Stephen M. Walt modified this theory to focus on threat, rather than power.

While maintaining the assumptions of balance of power theory about the role and nature of the international system, he added that states do not necessarily align against the strongest foreign power, but against the most threatening. He cites the example of the allied powers in World War II, each of whom were more powerful than Germany in terms of total resources, but aligned against Germany because of the threat that it posed.¹⁹ Some of the factors that may contribute to the level of threat that a state may pose are: aggregate power (a state's total resources, including population, economic power, and technological capabilities), geographic proximity, offensive power (the ability to threaten the integrity of another state at an acceptable cost), and aggressive intentions.²⁰

According to Walt's theory, when faced with a threat, states will either form alliances to balance against the threat or bandwagon with the threatening state. The more threatening a state is, in terms of the above listed factors, the more likely other states are to align against it. Balancing is regarded as the most common form of alliance formation, but bandwagoning, the act of aligning with the threatening state, does occur in instances where the threatened state is too weak to affect the outcome of the conflict or if there are no allies available to balance with. In addition, states may bandwagon when an unfavorable outcome to a conflict seems certain. In other words, states will often defect from the losing side and align with the side that seems certain to win in order to avoid or reduce possible punishment, or to share in the spoils of war. Examples of bandwagoning behavior are Romania and Bulgaria's shift from alignment with Germany to alignment

¹⁹ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 22.

²⁰ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 21-26.

with the Allied powers as an Allied victory began to be perceived as inevitable towards the end of World War II.²¹ Sadat's decision to defect from the anti-Israel Arab coalition and align with the US and Israel is also characteristic of bandwagoning behavior.²²

Omnibalancing

Balance of threat theory and neorealism in general has been criticized for placing too much stress on systemic factors and paying little attention to domestic factors such as regime type, leadership styles, and socioeconomic conditions. Critics claim that the level of analysis of the individual has not been explored sufficiently and cite the roles played by individual leaders, such as Sadat, in alignment decision-making.²³ In addition, Walt's theory has been criticized for failing to account for the idiosyncrasies of developing states. Stephen David has sought to repair these weaknesses through the theory of omnibalancing. Like neorealism, omnibalancing is preoccupied with security issues. However, it differs from neorealism in that it focuses on regime security rather than on state security and views state leaders, rather than the state itself, as an important unit of analysis. It posits that in much of the developing world, ruling elites frequently lack legitimacy and face domestic threats that often seem more ominous than those from other states. Thus, when state leaders are faced with domestic threats that overshadow external threats, balance of threat theory is insufficient to explain their alignment behavior. Omnibalancing, therefore, refers to alignment patterns that are intended to balance against both external and domestic threats simultaneously. David's theory predicts that

²¹ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 28-33.

²² Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 177.

²³ Avi Kober, *Coalition Defection: The Dissolution of Arab Anti-Israel Coalitions in War and Peace* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 7.

state leaders will align with the foreign power that is most likely to help them stay in power and that when state interests come in conflict with regime interests, the latter will take precedence. It acknowledges that leaders will often align with a secondary threat in order to prevent an alliance between the secondary threat and the primary (domestic) threat. This behavior is generally analyzed as bandwagoning within the balance of threat framework, but David classifies it as an act of balancing, because the key purpose is to balance against an internal threat.²⁴

David offers an alternative interpretation to Sadat's re-alignment with the US in the late 1970s and claims that omnibalancing provides the best explanation of this behavior. He acknowledges that Israel, Egypt's primary external threat, did not pose a direct challenge to Sadat's power since it had had no offensive intentions against Egypt since the end of the War of Attrition in 1970. Rather, Sadat's primary threats were a result of the Israeli occupation of the Sinai and its effects on various Egyptian groups, including the military, workers, and students who were becoming increasingly impatient with Sadat's inability to end the occupation. The Soviet Union, which had been Egypt's major great power ally, refused to provide Sadat with the necessary resources to end the occupation out of fear of provoking a confrontation with the US. As a result, Sadat sought an alignment with the US because he believed that the US was the only power able to force an end to the occupation of the Sinai, which he believed would settle much of the domestic instability that was threatening his hold on power.²⁵

David presents omnibalancing as a complement to balance of threat theory, rather than as a competing framework. He maintains that world politics are motivated by

²⁴ Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43 (1991).

²⁵ David, "Third World Alignment", 248-249.

power, interests, and rational decision making, and that they occur within an anarchical international structure. His primary contributions are the consideration of domestic threats in addition to external threats and the accommodation of the leader as an important unit of analysis in addition to that of the state.²⁶ Such an assertion seems to be consistent with Robert Jervis' claims that it is often not possible to explain international relations without consideration of the decision-maker's beliefs and perceptions of the world and that variation in domestic factors can account for variation in decision-maker's policies.²⁷

The Role of Ideology

An ideological explanation of alliances would suggest that states with similar domestic characteristics and structures are more likely to align with one another. Stephen Walt's research, however, shows that this is not generally the case, and, in fact, alliances among dissimilar states occur just as frequently as do those among similar states. In addition, with regard to alliances between similar states, ideological conformity is often ignored when it conflicts with security interests. Walt produces four generalizations of the role of ideology. First, ideology is more likely to be a factor when the states do not face direct external threats. For example, ideology played a more vital role in Middle East alignments before the Six Day War than after because Israel's victory positioned it as an important regional threat. Second, ideologies that seek to bring the member states into a single entity will fail as the result of divisions and competing factions within the

²⁶ Steven David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1991).

²⁷ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

movement and the requirement of the marginal states to sacrifice sovereignty. He cites as evidence of this, the failure of the United Arab Republic and pan-Arabism in general. Third, nationalism is the most widespread form of ideological cohesion among states. This is particularly true of the Arab states because the Arab nation is not confined to a single state. Arab nationalism has been a factor in various manifestations of Arab solidarity against Israel, such as during the Six Day War. Walt does acknowledge, however, that this type of solidarity usually does not produce anything more than symbolic gestures. Fourth, Walt asserts that there may not be a real distinction between ideological solidarity and external threats, i.e. when a state lacks legitimacy it may align with similar states in order to balance against a threat of ideological subversion. An example of this is the solidarity of the Arab monarchies in response to progressive movements throughout the region. Walt's research demonstrates that ideology plays a very limited, yet often exaggerated, role in most alliances and, depending on the nature of the ideology, may actually result in division rather than unity. Therefore, ideology should not be ignored, but should not be treated as a primary factor in alliance formation.²⁸

Defection

A neorealist account of alignment behavior should predict that defection from an alliance is likely to happen when the original threat that prompted the alliance is perceived to be eliminated or reduced. Such behavior is common at the ends of wars when a threat is clearly eliminated, as was the case at the end of World War II. Defection may also be the result of balancing, bandwagoning, or omnibalancing behaviors as the

²⁸ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 33-40.

result of new threats emerging or domestic strife. Regime change may also lead to defection, as happened following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Iranian monarchy.

In a study of Arab defection from anti-Israel coalitions, Avi Kober has identified several conditions that are conducive to alliance defection. The first condition is a self-perception of regime weakness, which may be basic or circumstantial. In the case of Sadat's defection beginning in 1977, Egypt was basically a powerful regional actor but was circumstantially weak because of economic deterioration that was contributing to social and political unrest. It was also becoming increasingly dependent on aid from the oil producing states to offset the large cost of its wars with Israel in 1967 and 1973. Sadat was in a position of self-perceived weakness vis-à-vis Israel, domestic instability, and the growing economic power of the oil producing states. In such a position, the Syrian foreign minister, Faruq Shara', observed that Sadat was being "defeated from within."²⁹ This perception of weakness was coupled with a belief that the return of the Sinai and improved economic conditions would allow Egypt to regain its regional stature and reassume its position as a regional leader in the near future.

A second condition that Kober discusses is the existence of a multipolar regional structure as opposed to a bipolar one. Multipolar systems are more conducive to defection because they offer more flexibility in alignment options, give states more autonomy within alliances, and promote circumstantial commitments rather than continuous commitments. The multipolar nature of the Middle East made it easier for Egypt, Jordan, and the PLO to defect from the Arab-Israeli conflict.³⁰

²⁹ Kober, *Coalition Defection*, 107.

³⁰ Kober, *Coalition Defection*, 129.

The third condition that makes defection more likely is a lack of coalition cohesion which may result from several factors. Large coalitions are less cohesive than small ones because members are more likely to share fewer of the same goals and objectives. In addition, it is more difficult to develop strategies that maximize the interests of all of the members, and it is more challenging to coordinate actions. Also, the degree of interdependence between coalition members affects cohesion, i.e. when the fate of an individual alliance member is tied directly to the fate of the alliance itself, defection is unlikely. The defection of a central member of an alliance can harm the alliance's effectiveness and prompt other members to also defect. Another factor that contributes to coalition cohesion is the ability of coalition members to punish or sanction those who defect.³¹ The relatively large number of members of the Arab diplomatic coalitions, the low level of interdependency among them, the defection of Egypt from the coalition, and the inability of the other members to sanction Egypt effectively have all contributed to a lack of cohesion among Arab diplomatic coalitions since the Camp David Accords.³²

Kober acknowledges that domestic factors often play an important role in prompting states to defect from an alliance. Such was the case with Russia's defection from its alliance with France and Britain during World War I and its pursuit of a separate peace with Germany. The new Bolshevik regime was unable to continue a war with Germany while simultaneously trying to consolidate its domestic power. During diplomatic processes, domestic concerns tend to overshadow external threats, whereas, the opposite is true during times of war. This is because the conditions of war produce greater risks wherein actors may suffer greater losses in shorter periods of time. During

³¹ Kober, *Coalition Defection*, 16-20.

³² Kober, *Coalition Defection*, 129-130.

diplomatic processes, however, regimes tend to be more concerned with long term objectives such as improving economic conditions and securing their hold on power. Also, diplomatic processes generally emerge as viable options after military solutions have failed, thus diminishing the relevance of external threats and bringing domestic concerns to the forefront of decision-making.³³

Delinking

When a state perceives an alliance to be threatening it will naturally attempt to form an alliance of its own to balance against the threat. When possible, it will also attempt to break up the alliance by diplomatic or military means.³⁴ It might do this by imposing economic sanctions, encouraging domestic strife, offering economic aid, or interfering with coalition cohesiveness. This has been the motivation behind Israel's pursuit of bilateral peace agreements with the Arab states rather than a comprehensive peace settlement. This strategy was supported by the US until the election of Jimmy Carter, who was in favor of a comprehensive, multilateral peace settlement. Despite this, Israel's Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, began to pursue bilateral negotiations with Sadat in 1977 with the help of the Shah of Iran, King Hasan of Morocco, and Nicolai Ceausescu of Romania. In August and September of 1977, Begin made contact with these three leaders to solicit their help in arranging a meeting with Sadat. They successfully persuaded Sadat to send his Deputy Premier to meet with Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Foreign Minister, on September 16 to discuss the possibility of an Egyptian-Israeli summit. Sadat was enticed by the possibilities of regaining the entire Sinai Peninsula and

³³ Kober, *Coalition Defection*, 25.

³⁴ Kober, *Coalition Defection*, 21.

receiving significant economic aid from the US. In addition, Israel informed Sadat of intelligence that had been obtained of a Libyan-backed plot to depose him, thus establishing trust and assisting him with his domestic struggle. In October, Sadat met with Ceausescu and the Shah in Romania to discuss a possible meeting with Begin. On November 9, Sadat announced his intention to go to Israel, and on the 19th he followed through with that announcement. Although it seemed that Sadat had made the first move towards a bilateral peace, it was in fact, the result of Begin's persuasion and enticement. As a result of Egypt's defection, the Arab coalition was weakened significantly and Carter's plan for a comprehensive peace was undermined.³⁵

Alliance Formation and Defection in a Complex International System

Robert Jervis has argued that the international system is complex, interconnected, and unpredictable. He states that "the world would be better to understand if its relationships were straightforward, one-way, linear, and additive," but they are not.³⁶ Rather, the interconnected nature of the international system results in unintended consequences that are often unavoidable and unpredictable. International politics cannot be analyzed as a mere system of bilateral relations between states because one state's relations with another will affect the relations of other states through a sort of ripple effect. Furthermore, international relations cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect relationships because they result from choices made by decision makers. The options available to decision makers are often conditioned by systemic factors or systemic effects caused by the decisions of others. Likewise, decision maker's perceptions of their

³⁵ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 303-304.

³⁶ Robert Jervis, "Systems and Interactions Effects," in *Coping with Complexity in the International System*, ed. Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 25.

options and of the others actors involved are often influenced by their beliefs about the nature of international relations. Decision makers will try to anticipate what other players will do and strategize accordingly.³⁷

The remainder of this paper will analyze Syria's relations with Iran and efforts at encouraging Syria to defect from their alignment within the frameworks laid out by Jervis, Walt, David, and Kober. It will consider the international system to be a complex system as described by Jervis and will analyze actors' choices as the result of their perceptions of external and domestic threats and the options available to them. In other words, the analytical framework proposed here is consistent with Walt and David's arguments that actors will react to threats by balancing or bandwagoning, but also suggests that these actions are the outcomes of decisions made by decision makers who are juggling relations with many different states simultaneously, dealing with domestic issues, and whose personal perceptions condition their decision making. Therefore, Syria's alignment with Iran will be viewed as an attempt to balance against perceived external and domestic threats within a complex system. Their relations will be treated as multidimensional and as the result of many different, yet interrelated factors.

³⁷ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

CHAPTER 3

SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS

External and Domestic Factors

Many factors, both external and domestic, contributed to Asad's decision to seek an alliance with Iran. These factors are:

- 1) Sadat's defection from the Arab-Israeli conflict, beginning in 1977, which weakened the Arab coalition and allowed Israel to focus its military resources on its northern front with Syria, thereby increasing the perceived threat posed by Israel.
- 2) Developments in the Lebanese civil war which presented the possibility of Israeli intervention in Lebanon and prompted Israeli retaliation against Syria in response to Palestinian guerilla activity.
- 3) The rise to power of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in opposition to pro-Syrian elements in the Iraqi Ba'th Party. Hussein's hostility towards Syria eliminated the possibility of a strong Arab coalition and posed a threat to Asad's regime.
- 4) Asad's domestic struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood.
- 5) The availability of an alliance with Iran- a byproduct of geopolitical and ideological factors.

The relationship has persisted largely because, apart from the disappearance of the threat from Saddam Hussein, the factors cited above remain essentially unresolved, i.e.,

they may have taken on a different appearance, but the essential threat still exists. For example, the Arab coalition continued to weaken with the inability of the Arab states to sanction Egypt effectively and the subsequent defection of Jordan and the PLO from the conflict, thus bolstering Israel's power relative to the Arab states. Also, while Saddam Hussein is no longer in power in Iraq, the US led occupation of that country has presented an opportunity for Syria and Iran to work together to prevent a regime from emerging in Iraq that would be hostile to their interests. So while Iraq does not necessarily present a threat to Syria anymore, the domestic instability and US presence there are factors that contribute to the strength of Syrian-Iranian relations. Likewise, although the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990, Iran and Syria have continued to work together to prevent Israeli influence in Lebanese domestic politics and to pressure Israel through Hezbollah. The following sections will discuss each of these factors in terms of how they influenced the creation of the alliance and how their lack of resolution has contributed to its persistence.

Sadat's Defection

On November 9, 1977, Anwar Sadat announced to the Egyptian Parliament that he was "ready to go the ends of the earth for peace, even to the Knesset itself."³⁸ Eight days following this announcement and two days before he arrived in Israel, Sadat went to Damascus to meet with Asad, who accused him of treason against the Arab nation. Asad was so distraught over Sadat's plans that he had even considered placing him under arrest

³⁸ Mohamed Heikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 258.

in Damascus to prevent him from going to Jerusalem.³⁹ After their meeting, Sadat held a press conference in which he reaffirmed his decision to go to Israel and acknowledged Asad's opposition. After Sadat had left Syria, Asad stated that he was in favor of peace, but that a "successful strategy cannot be pursued through unsuccessful tactics."⁴⁰ In September 1978, Begin, Sadat, and Carter signed the Camp David Accords and six months later the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed. Sadat, who had originally requested the withdrawal of Israeli forces to the pre-1967 borders and an independent state for the Palestinians, ended up securing the much lesser objective of an Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory and the postponement of any realistic possibility of a Palestinian state until after a period of limited Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank. Such a watered down peace agreement was not only humiliating for Sadat but set a precedent for Israeli dominance for future Arab-Israeli negotiations.

Sadat's bilateral agreement with Israel had enormous consequences for the Syrian regime's perceptions of its perceived security. Although Israel's aggregate power remained unchanged, its offensive power vis-à-vis Syria was greatly increased because it allowed the resources that had been used to secure its southern border and maintain the occupation of the Sinai to be redistributed in the Golan Heights and in Israel's northeastern frontier. In addition to strengthening Israel's position, Sadat's defection significantly weakened the Arab coalition. Because Egypt was the most powerful member of the coalition, its defection eliminated the coalition's ability to use force against Israel, thereby weakening Syria's ability to balance against the Israeli threat.

³⁹ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 259-260.

⁴⁰ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 306.

The month after the signing of the Camp David Accords, Asad went to Iraq in an attempt to mend relations and plan a strategy for sanctioning Egypt in the case that the peace treaty was to be signed. This tactical alliance was a short-term success and the pressure it exerted on the other Arab states resulted in the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab League and the severing of diplomatic relations of most Arab states with Egypt immediately after the signing of the peace treaty.⁴¹ The Iraqi rapprochement failed shortly after Saddam Hussein's takeover of power in Iraq for reasons that will be discussed below, leaving Syria once again without a strong Arab ally.

Sadat expected the harsh reaction he received from Asad and the other Arab leaders, but he also believed that Egypt's political isolation would not last long and that it would be able to regain its former position within the Arab world, and he was right. In 1984, Jordan resumed diplomatic relations with Egypt, and in 1987 the Arab summit determined that other Arab states should be allowed to resume diplomatic relations as well. In 1989, Egypt was readmitted to the Arab League.

The failure of Syria to sanction Egypt effectively and the ineffectiveness of Arab coalitions contributed to the willingness of Asad, as well as of the PLO and Jordan, to participate in bilateral talks with Israel during the Madrid Conference of 1991. This conference ultimately resulted in Israel and the PLO signing the Oslo Accords in 1993 under which the PLO recognized the state of Israel and renounced the pursuit of its interests through violent means in exchange for conditional and limited self-rule in the Occupied Territories. This was followed by Jordan's peace treaty with Israel in 1994. These events further weakened Syria's bargaining position and set precedents for peace proposals that were completely unacceptable to Asad. For example, Jordan's agreement

⁴¹ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 313-314.

included an arrangement that Jordanian lands that had been cultivated by Israelis for 25 years or more could be leased by Israel. Asad feared that such a precedent could embolden the Israelis to seek similar arrangements for Israeli settlements in the Golan, thus compromising his ability to negotiate a complete return of the Golan Heights in the future. Likewise, the Oslo Accords created a precedent for settling territorial issues in phases and prompted an Israeli proposal in 1994, which Asad rejected, to turn over a handful of Druze villages in the Golan as part of a preliminary arrangement similar to the one that had been made with the PLO.⁴²

Sadat's defection, the precedent it set for bilateral negotiations with Israel, and the subsequent deals made between the PLO, Jordan, and Israel weakened Syria's ability to use force against Israel and set unattractive precedents for future negotiations. As the possibility of an effective Arab war coalition deteriorated and then collapsed, and diplomatic coalitions proved to be weak and ineffective, Asad sought and cultivated a relationship with Iran as an alternative partner in the armed struggle against Israel and more generally to bolster his bargaining position.

The Lebanese Civil War

The domestic situation in Lebanon had been incredibly important to Asad's strategies from the very beginning of his presidency. Shortly after coming to power, he was challenged on the point that, as an Alawi, he was not a true Muslim. He set out to counter this by gaining recognition from Shi'i leaders, turning to Lebanon's main Shi'i cleric, Musa al-Sadr. In 1967, Lebanese law officially recognized the Shi'i community and the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council (SISC) was established with Imam Musa al-Sadr

⁴² Kober, *Coalition Defection*, 164-166.

at its head. With the establishment of the SISC came the question of whether or not Lebanon's small Alawi community, who lived in northern Lebanon and only numbered about 20,000, should come under its jurisdiction. Up until 1973, the Alawi sheiks in both Lebanon and Syria resisted efforts to put the Lebanese Alawi community under the jurisdiction of the Shi'is because the two communities lived in different parts of Lebanon and had little in common. However, when the Ba'thist regime was faced with this crisis of Islamic legitimacy, they encouraged the Alawi sheiks in Syria to persuade those in Lebanon to accept the jurisdiction of the SISC. In July, 1973, Imam Musa al-Sadr appointed a Lebanese Alawi to be the mufti of northern Lebanon, and effectively drew the Lebanese Alawi community under his wing. The Ba'th employed the logic that if the Lebanese Alawis could be considered Shi'is, then the Syrian Alawis could also be considered Shi'is, and were therefore 'proper' Muslims.⁴³ This granted much needed legitimacy to Asad's regime and forged a relationship with the Lebanese Shi'is that would prove to be crucial in Syria's involvement in the Lebanese civil war and its relationship with Iran.

Civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, mainly the result of the growing political weight of Lebanon's Palestinian refugee population, which numbered about 400,000, and the presence of armed Palestinian guerillas following Jordan's heavy handed campaign to expel the PLO in 1970. The PLO and the guerillas enjoyed a significant amount of freedom in Lebanon as the result of the 1969 Cairo Agreement which recognized the PLO's right to function in Lebanon and to provide security for the Palestinian refugees living there. Before the 1973 war, Palestinian raids from Lebanon into Israel proper were

⁴³ Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 237-54.

far and few between. However, Israeli forces used Palestinian attacks anywhere in the world as an excuse to retaliate against Lebanon and exacerbate the delicate situation there. For example, after an attack on an Israeli airliner in Athens in 1968, 13 Lebanese airliners were destroyed on the ground by Israeli commandos at Beirut airport. Likewise, after the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972, Israel retaliated by destroying bridges, homes, and villages throughout Lebanon.⁴⁴

Despite the relative lull in guerrilla activity during this period, Israeli forces reacted to the increasing diplomatic influence of the PLO with military escalation. In 1974, Israel launched 1,437 fire attacks and 55 air raids against targets in Lebanon, killing 167 civilians. Even as the PLO attempted to restrain its activities in order to maintain its position in Lebanon, Israeli attacks continued to terrorize the villagers of the south and intensify sectarian tensions. After the October War the Maronite establishment had become increasingly worried that the Palestinian refugees might be permanently resettled in Lebanon, a development that would upset the sectarian balance numerically against the Maronites. The mere presence of the PLO was increasingly blamed by the Maronite establishment for Lebanon's woes.⁴⁵

By the end of 1975, the situation had deteriorated into civil war and Asad was faced with a tricky predicament. If the Maronites seized control, they would establish a partnership with Israel in order to secure their hold on power, and if the leftist coalition, which was backed by the PLO, gained a victory, Israel would intervene on behalf of the Maronites in an effort to drive out the PLO and put in place a pro-Israel government. As Asad perceived it, Lebanon was doomed to succumb to Israeli domination unless he

⁴⁴ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 275-276.

⁴⁵ Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: the Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 358-359.

could intervene successfully.⁴⁶ It was within this context that Asad first attempted to intervene diplomatically in February 1976. When this failed, he made the risky decision to use force in Lebanon against his traditional friends, the leftists and the Palestinians. He did so, in order to prevent a radical, leftist state from emerging in Lebanon that would be a constant provocation to Israel, and because he hoped that by intervening on the side of the Maronites, he could preempt Israel from doing so. In essence, he made the decision that he felt would be most likely to keep Israel out of Lebanon and prevent a secular democratic state from emerging there.⁴⁷

Syrian troops crossed the Lebanese border on June 1, 1976 and by the end of the month were in control of two thirds of Lebanon. In October, after a major offensive that nearly defeated the guerillas and their allies, Asad agreed to attend a peace summit in Saudi Arabia at which his activities in Lebanon were given Arab approval and Syrian troops formed the main component of an Arab Deterrent Force, meant to enforce the Cairo Agreement and keep peace in Lebanon. Syria shifted its alliances in 1977 after Sadat's trip to Israel left Syria and the PLO in need of new allies. Also, Kamal Junblatt, the leader of the Lebanese leftist coalition, was murdered, resulting in the disintegration of the Lebanese left and its realignment with Syria. Simultaneously, the Maronites were beginning to question Asad's motives in intervening on their behalf and were receiving weapons, money, and strategic advice from Israel.⁴⁸

In March 1978, Israeli forces launched a full scale invasion of southern Lebanon in response to a hijacking incident in which thirty seven were killed in a gunfight between Palestinian guerillas and Israeli security forces. This invasion was significant

⁴⁶ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 276.

⁴⁷ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 281-283, 289.

⁴⁸ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 288-289.

because it resulted in the renewal of sectarian violence in Lebanon and was a catalyst for the militarization of Lebanon's Shi'i community, thousands of whom were killed or displaced as a result of the invasion. Israel invaded again in June 1982, this time surging across southern Lebanon and reaching the outskirts of Beirut in a matter of days despite resistance from the Syrian air force, PLO guerillas, and fighters from the Lebanese National Movement. The invasion and subsequent sixty seven day siege of Beirut resulted in massive civilian casualties and the withdrawal of the PLO from Lebanon.⁴⁹ Although Syria lost 400 tanks, 90 aircraft, and approximately 1900 soldiers in the initial thrust of the invasion, a majority of Syrian forces managed to endure the remainder of the invasion and maintain control of strategic positions in Lebanon. Asad's primary goal had been to defend the Beirut-Damascus highway and the Bika' valley in order to prevent an invasion of Syria, and in this he was successful.⁵⁰

In the aftermath of the invasion, Asad relied heavily on support from Iran and Iran's influence with the Lebanese Shi'is in order to wage a campaign of guerilla warfare against Israeli forces. With the withdrawal of the PLO, the two Shi'i militias, Amal and Hezbollah, emerged as the most vigorous opponents of the Israeli occupation and the Maronite establishment that it aimed to protect. Throughout the occupation, Iran kept a presence of approximately 1,500 Revolutionary Guards in the Bika' Valley and provided significant support to Amal and the emerging Hezbollah militias to fight the occupying forces. The force exerted by these militias combined with Asad's manipulation of Lebanese political figures, the replenishment of his military losses by the Soviet Union, and the disillusionment of the Israeli public led to the collapse of the Israeli-Lebanese

⁴⁹ Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organization: People, Power, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 124.

⁵⁰ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 71.

peace agreement and the retreat of Israeli forces to a buffer zone along the Lebanese-Israeli border.⁵¹ Although Israeli forces had withdrawn from the bulk of Lebanese territory, the threat of Israeli reintervention remained unless Asad could effectively defeat the Maronite militias and consolidate his control over the situation in Lebanon, a process that lasted five more years. When the civil war ended in 1990, Hezbollah was the only militia not forced to disarm, and has continued to play a vital role in the security and politics of Lebanon ever since.

The impact of the Lebanese civil war on Syrian-Iranian relations was tremendous and long lasting. Asad felt that he had no choice but to interfere in Lebanon in order to prevent it from becoming an extension of Israeli power and he likely would have failed had it not been for Iran's support. Asad's 'sword and shield' strategy against Israel depended on the effectiveness of Hezbollah's ability to strike Israeli positions while Asad hid behind a defensive shield established in the Bīqa' Valley and along the Golan border. It is unlikely that the Shi'i militias would have been at all effective or even relevant had it not been for Iran's support. Because of the high risk nature of Syria's involvement in Lebanon, this support was of critical importance to Syrian security, and ultimately resulted in the Israeli withdrawal from the buffer zone in 2000 and a continued Syrian military presence in Lebanon that lasted until 2005. Throughout this period, the two states continued to arm and support Hezbollah, and by doing so, to maintain a threat against Israel by proxy.⁵² Even since the end of the occupation, Syria and Iran have remained close allies with Hezbollah and have continued to balance against Israel in this way, as demonstrated by the 2006 Lebanon War.

⁵¹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 88-90.

⁵² Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Foreign Policy of Syria" in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 156.

Saddam Hussein and Iraq

During the spring of 1979, Asad pursued a short-lived rapprochement with Iraq in an effort to compensate for Egypt's defection from the conflict with Israel. Asad and Iraq's president, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, were even in the midst of negotiations to create a loose federation between their two states. Relations deteriorated drastically, however, in July when Saddam Hussein ousted Bakr and seized power in Iraq. Within two weeks of his take over as president, Hussein was already accusing Asad of conspiring with his domestic enemies to have him deposed. Besides feeling threatened by one another, Asad and Hussein had severely different perceptions of the Iranian revolution. While Asad welcomed revolutionary Iran as a potential ally in the struggle against Zionism, Hussein was only peripherally concerned with the Arab-Israeli conflict and was far more worried about Iran's influence on Iraq's large Shi'i population. After Hussein expelled Khomeini from Iraq in October 1978, an underground Shi'i party called *al-Da'wa al-Islamiya* (The Islamic Call) began holding demonstrations and targeting government officials in terrorist attacks. Hussein responded viciously against the *Da'wa*, condemning all of its members to death and executing key figures publicly, including Baqir al-Sadr, the cousin of Asad's friend Musa al-Sadr.⁵³

On September 22 1980, Iraq launched an invasion of Iran that marked the evolution of the conflict between the two states into all out war. Asad immediately condemned the move, claiming that it would fragment the Arab states and drain valuable resources that would be better put to use in the conflict with Israel. Furthermore, a triumphant Iraq would pose a greater threat to Asad's security as well as his ability to threaten Israel. As such, he decided to support Iran in open defiance of the moderate and

⁵³ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 355-357.

conservative Arab states. In August 1980, Hussein's forces had raided the Syrian embassy in Baghdad and expelled the staff on charges that they were supplying the *Da'wa* with weapons, and shortly following the outbreak of war, on October 12, he formally broke off relations with Syria. As Hussein became more hostile and evidence mounted that he was supporting the Muslim Brotherhood's insurgency in Syria, Asad directed Syrian intelligence to cooperate extensively with Iran in fighting Iraq. In 1982, he closed the Iraqi oil pipeline that crossed his territory to the Mediterranean, delivering a destructive blow to the Iraqi economy.⁵⁴

By July 1982, Iraqi forces had been driven across the border and Iran was on the offensive, a position they maintained until the end of 1986. As the US began to be more involved in the conflict on the side of Hussein, Iraqi forces were able to regain the offensive in 1987 and reclaim strategic areas, including the al-Faw peninsula south of Basra. As Iraqi momentum increased, Khomeini agreed to accept a ceasefire in July 1988. Eight years of intense war did little to alter the politics of the region: both the Iraqi and Iranian regimes remained the same and neither state had gained or lost considerable amounts of territory. The enormous loss of life and the economic devastation were the only real consequences of the war for either state. As F. Gregory Gause III has put it, "In the catalogue of evidence that war can be a senseless endeavor, the Iran-Iraq War is exhibit A."⁵⁵

The war was significant for Asad, because it pitted him against the Arab Gulf states, Jordan, and Egypt, all of which provided operational, logistical, and material support to the Iraqi war effort. His ability to withstand Arab, as well as Soviet, pressure

⁵⁴ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 358-359.

⁵⁵ F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87.

to support Iraq boosted his confidence and prestige. It also enhanced his autonomy within the regional system and increased Iran's level of dependence on their relationship, thus consolidating the alliance.

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait and occupied the entire country within a matter of hours. The US immediately began putting together an international coalition to liberate Kuwait and Asad was forced to choose between participating in the US led operation or supporting one of his greatest enemies in opposition to US intervention in the region. Hussein had proven to be a real threat to Asad in terms of his support for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the anti-Syrian militia of Michel 'Awn in Lebanon, whereas the United States was only perceived to be a threat as a result of its ties to Israel.⁵⁶ As such, Asad chose to support the anti-Iraq campaign and sent a military division to Saudi Arabia to participate in the coalition. Iran did not wish to get caught up in another war with Iraq and therefore did not join the coalition. It did not support Saddam Hussein, however, and did nothing to obstruct the coalition's efforts.

Since the 2003 US led invasion of Iraq, Syria and Iran have continued to cooperate in order to prevent a strong threat from emerging in Iraq. They have also had an interest in keeping the US bogged down in Iraq in order to discourage military action against either of their regimes. They do not necessarily want a US failure in Iraq as that could result in the fragmentation of the country, an event that would most likely have a negative impact on the stability of their respective states. However, both states feared at the onset of the invasion that a quick and easy victory might embolden the US and encourage it to turn its attention to them. There is evidence that certain factions within

⁵⁶ F. Gregory Gause, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf," *Security Studies* 13 (2003), 297-300.

the Iranian government have provided financial and material support to Shi'i militias in Iraq while the Syrian government has turned a blind eye to Sunni fighters crossing its porous border with Iraq.⁵⁷

The Domestic Struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Syria was embroiled in an internal conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's grievances against the Asad regime were largely the result of the economic downturn that followed the years of prosperity after the 1973 war and the socio-economic inequalities that this boom and subsequent downturn produced. From 1973-1974, foreign economic aid to Syria increased from 50 million dollars annually to 600 million dollars and Syrian oil revenues increased ten fold. This unprecedented influx of money resulted in a period of enormous public investment during which those involved in the upper levels of the Syrian bureaucracy and in state run industries became extremely wealthy, forming a new state bourgeoisie class. By 1977, however, the cash flow had slowed down and economic pressures caused by rapid urban migration and the invasion of Lebanon led to a sudden increase in the cost of living. Many Syrians were disillusioned and discontented by the corruption and greed that existed in the upper ranks of the Ba'th Party, a party that had come to power on the promise of economic and social equality. Within this context, the Brotherhood's rebellion against the regime was a radical manifestation of a popular sentiment.⁵⁸

The Brotherhood began its struggle against Asad by staging small scale attacks and hit and run assassinations of leading Ba'th party members and prominent

⁵⁷ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 293.

⁵⁸ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 318-320.

professionals. Asad first tried to appease public opinion by tackling the issue of government corruption, a task which proved to be too difficult as many of those involved in the corruption were close advisors, friends, and even immediate family members. The Brotherhood's attacks worsened, and in June 1979 they attacked the Aleppo Artillery School, killing 83 cadets. In March 1980, they began a strategy of inciting riots and urban uprisings by intimidating merchants and shopkeepers. The market in Aleppo was shut down for two weeks and the defiance spread to other cities.

Until 1980, Asad had been slow to react to the uprising, but as the violence continued, he resorted to using force. In early March, approximately 10,000 soldiers and 250 armored vehicles were deployed to Aleppo to put an end to the rebellion there. Similar measures were taken in Hama. On June 26, 1980 Asad was nearly assassinated by a grenade attack. The following day, the President's brother Rif'at retaliated by ordering an attack on a desert prison in which members of the Brotherhood were being held, resulting in the death of nearly 500 prisoners in their jail cells. In July, membership in the Muslim Brotherhood was made a capital offense. The violence persisted and by late 1981 had spread to Damascus where a series of car bomb explosions killed hundreds. In February 1982 a general rebellion commenced in the city of Hama, prompting government forces to wage a brutal three week land and air war on the city in which most of the infrastructure was destroyed, important buildings demolished, and between 5,000 and 10,000 people killed.⁵⁹

Asad blamed the Brotherhood for acting as the agents of foreign enemies, and to a large extent he was probably right. The insurgents were well funded, equipped, and trained. Over 15,000 machine guns were captured from them, as well as US made

⁵⁹ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 329-334.

communication equipment. Syrian forces had intercepted weapons being smuggled from Iraq on several occasions and most of the captured vehicles were of Iraqi origin.⁶⁰ Many of the captured guerillas confessed to having been trained in Jordanian training camps and King Hussein later admitted to having been involved in the campaign to overthrow Asad's regime.⁶¹

Aligning with Iran aided Asad in his struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood in a number of ways. First of all, it gave a much needed boost to his legitimacy, which was based largely on his continued hard-line stance against Zionism and Western involvement in the region. Aligning with Iran allowed him to continue his anti-Israel position in the wake of Egypt's defection from the conflict, and by doing so, sustained his primary source of legitimacy at a time when it was being threatened. Second, aligning with Iran prevented the Islamic Republic from supporting the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. It is likely that Asad held many of the same fears as his counterparts in Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia about the possibility of a spillover effect. Iranian officials had expressed support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt,⁶² and although this support was in word only, Asad most likely considered what might happen if Iran were to begin supporting Islamist movements throughout the region. It may be, therefore, that one of the reasons Asad sought out an alliance with Iran was to prevent the Islamic Republic from becoming a threat and supporting his domestic enemies.

The showdown at Hama devastated the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to challenge Asad's rule but it did not solve the inequalities and divisions within Syrian society that were at the heart of the conflict. The 'Islamization' of the Sunni Muslims has been just

⁶⁰ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 335-336.

⁶¹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 167.

⁶² "Iranian Leaders Consider Egypt Ripe for Islamic Uprising", *The New York Times*, Feb. 24, 1979.

as noticeable in Syria as throughout the region and has been a cause for concern for both the Asad regimes, which have sought to maintain a delicate balance between appeasing the public's Islamist sentiments without conceding any real power.⁶³ They have done this by funding the building of mosques and easing certain restrictions that have been challenged as un-Islamic, e.g., allowing soldiers to attend a mosque in uniform. Also, Syria's partnerships with Iran and groups like Hezbollah and Hamas that are overtly Islamic have given the regimes a certain pro-Islamic appearance, or at least one of not being anti-Islam. In the case of Syria, domestic constraints may not require the regime to be in constant conflict with Israel in order to maintain its legitimacy, but they do set constraints on what the nature of peace with Israel can be, i.e. the return of the Golan Heights to complete Syrian control.⁶⁴ As such, Syria must maintain its ability to threaten Israel by conventional or unconventional means in order to supersede the precedents established by the Camp David Accords, Oslo Agreement, and the Jordanian peace treaty. Devoid of its partnership with Iran, Syria would be powerless to threaten Israel and could easily be obliged to accept an unsatisfactory compromise with Israel.

Ideological Availability

Despite Asad's need for a strong regional ally to balance against his external and domestic threats, it is highly unlikely that Iran would have been that ally if the Islamic revolution had not occurred. The revolution and the ideological redirection of the new Iranian regime allowed it to collaborate with Syria in order to meet its security needs. The two regimes differed substantially in their ideological approaches to domestic issues:

⁶³ Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, 36-37.

⁶⁴ Magnus Kristianson, *Syria's Omnibalancing Act: Making Sense of Syria's Support for the Hezbollah* (Cand. Polit. thesis, University of Oslo, 2006).

the Iranian regime was based upon a worldview prescribed by Shi'i Islam and the idea that the clergy should rule, and the Ba'athist regime in Syria was founded, at least in theory, on principles of Arab nationalism, socialism, and secularism. The regime in power prior to Asad's takeover in 1970 had been far more committed to these principles and was significantly more radical than Asad, who proved to be a more pragmatic leader and made decisions on the basis of security rather than ideology. Therefore, Asad's regime was more open to aligning with Iran than his predecessor had been, just as Khomeini was more inclined to an alliance than the Shah had been. Although the ideological differences between the two regimes spilled over into their foreign policies, i.e. Khomeini did advocate the spread of the Islamic revolution to other Muslim countries and Asad always perceived himself as a champion of Arab nationalism, their mutual opposition to Western penetration of the region, a characteristic of both Islamist and Ba'athist ideology, trumped these differences and allowed them to pursue a strategic relationship. In other words, notwithstanding the stark differences in their ideologies, the similarities were what really mattered and what made them sufficiently compatible to collaborate in order to balance against their mutual threats.

The ideological differences between the regimes were easily overlooked because of more pressing security issues and because strict adherence to their ideological foundations would have resulted in irreconcilable foreign policy contradictions. The Iranian regime could not have supported the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood without collaborating with Saddam Hussein and withdrawing its support for Shi'i opposition movements in Iraq. Therefore, while most states in the region were alarmed by

Khomeini's Islamist rhetoric, Asad correctly believed that Iran would not support the Islamist opposition within Syria.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Gause, "Balancing What?" 290-291.

CHAPTER 4

DELINKING SYRIA FROM IRAN

Efforts During the Iran-Iraq War

From the outset of the Iran-Iraq War, Asad faced continual pressure from the pro-Iraqi Arab states to defect from his alliance with Iran and adopt a neutral stance, if not a pro-Iraqi one. This pressure took on three main forms: first, there was an enormous amount of anti-Syrian propaganda emanating primarily from Iraq that targeted Asad's Arab credentials; second, there was pressure to accept economic aid from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in exchange for neutrality and improved relations with Jordan and Iraq; and third, Iraq and Jordan supported Asad's domestic opposition in an effort to weaken the Syrian regime. This last form of pressure, and its adverse effects, has already been discussed and so will not be explored further in this section.

Immediately after Syria declared its support for Iran in the conflict, the Iraqi regime began a propaganda campaign to discredit Asad, accusing him of betraying the Arabs by sending troops to Iran to fight against Iraq despite the absence of any evidence supporting this claim. On October 11, 1980, Iraq severed ties with both Syria and Libya and accused them of supporting the "Magian racist clique" in Iran.⁶⁶ Towards the end of 1982, as Egypt began venturing into Arab politics again, Egypt's President Mubarak

⁶⁶ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 35.

criticized Syria's support of Iran, calling it "unbecoming" and stating that, "The Syrians at least, should have played the role of mediators."⁶⁷ Likewise, Saddam Hussein persisted in his accusations, stating that Asad was in collusion with the Arab "nation's enemies" who were plotting "against the Arab nation, Arab civilization and the Arabs' entire security and future."⁶⁸ In June 1985, Hezbollah militants hijacked a plane in Beirut and took 39 American hostages. The hostages were released less than a month after the hijacking due to Syrian and Iranian intervention. While this incident improved Western perceptions of the Syrian regime, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq used the incident to depict the Syrian regime as a supporter of terrorism, and accused Syria of being involved in recent terrorist attacks on Jordanians abroad.⁶⁹ By and large, the pressure exerted on Syria through direct criticism and propaganda was ineffective. At all the Arab summits and Arab League meetings throughout this period, Syria was harshly criticized by Iraq and its allies for supporting Iran. In an effort to maintain its influence in Arab politics and to prevent isolation, Syria signed several condemnations of Iran during the war, including at the Fez summit in 1982, the Tunis meeting in 1987, and the Amman summit in 1987. These departures from solidarity with Iran lacked substance, however, as the Syrian authorities were quick to release statements disagreeing with outcomes of the meetings and stating their support for Iran. For example, immediately after the Amman summit in 1987, the Syrian foreign minister al-Shara' stated that the Syrian regime did not agree with the Arab League's condemnation of Iran and that Syrian reservations had been left out of the final statement by the Secretary General. He also affirmed that "Syria remains

⁶⁷ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 81.

⁶⁸ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 81.

⁶⁹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 140-141.

firmly on the side of the Iranians, and will never depart from its solidarity with the Islamic Republic.”⁷⁰

Throughout this period, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait made several attempts to break up the Syrian-Iranian alliance using their economic influence. In early 1983, Saudi Prince Abdullah shuttled between Damascus and Baghdad in an effort to initiate a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement. His efforts, coupled with an offer of two billion dollars in return for the reopening of the trans-Syrian pipeline, failed to shift Asad’s position.⁷¹ Again in 1985, Prince Abdullah began trying to persuade Asad to moderate his position and conform to the Arab mainstream. This time the focus was on encouraging a dialogue with Jordan in hopes that improved Syrian-Jordanian relations might facilitate a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement. In September, the Syrian and Jordanian prime ministers agreed to meet in Saudi Arabia. While they were in Jeddah participating in Saudi mediated negotiations, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, the Syrian vice president, was in Tehran discussing the negotiations with President Khamene’i, who expressed his disappointment with the Syrian-Jordanian meeting. Furthermore, he was frustrated with Syria’s inability to pay for Iranian oil shipments, for which the Syrians owed Iran over one billion dollars. By the end of the year, there had been several rounds of negotiations between the Jordanian and Syrian delegations and King Hussein had accepted an invitation to meet Hafiz al-Asad in Damascus in December. Syria’s worsening economic situation and need for oil played a decisive role in its concessions to Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Iran had discontinued oil shipments in October due to Syria’s failure to pay and in order to demonstrate its displeasure with the Syrian-Jordanian rapprochement. Thus, Asad was in

⁷⁰ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 245.

⁷¹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 82.

a vulnerable position when the Saudi and Kuwaiti regimes offered to deliver oil to Syria through Jordan if favorable steps were made towards improved relations between the two states. By May 1986, Syria owed Iran nearly two billion dollars in oil debt, and had become dependent on the oil shipments and the over 500 million dollars in foreign aid it received annually from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.⁷² At this point Jordanian-Syrian relations were approaching normalization and King Hussein sought to take advantage of Syria's vulnerable economic situation to seek an improvement in Syrian-Iraqi relations. Jordan's efforts resulted in an announcement that the Iraqi and Syrian foreign ministers would meet in June in anticipation of a future meeting between Asad and Saddam Hussein. In early June, one week before the Syrian-Iraqi meeting was to take place, an Iranian delegation arrived in Damascus with the objective of derailing the upcoming negotiations. During this visit, the Iranian delegation agreed to renew oil shipments and to allow Syria more time to pay off its debt. While the Iranians were still in Damascus an Iranian tanker delivered the first shipment of oil to have arrived in Syria in many months.⁷³ Needless to say, the Syrian-Iraqi meeting was cancelled and Asad's ability to extract concessions from the Arab states as well as Iran was improved.

Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait continued to pressure Syria into opening a dialogue with Iraq, and by early 1987, the Soviet Union was also exerting its influence. Asad met with Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow in April and agreed to meet with Saddam Hussein immediately upon returning to Damascus. In return Gorbachev agreed to reschedule Syria's 15 billion dollars in debt and to provide Syria with much needed weaponry. The Soviet Union had an interest in ending the Gulf War because it felt that it

⁷² Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 181.

⁷³ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 185.

distracted from the Arab-Israeli conflict and that it invited US intervention in the region. The Soviet regime also believed that the fastest path to peace was isolating Iran and forcing it to seek a ceasefire. Thus, the Soviets, as well as the regimes in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait were pleased when Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Asad met for the first time in nearly a decade to discuss possible forms of future cooperation. The two parties agreed to a gradual reduction in hostilities between them, to stop activities meant to destabilize their regimes, and to release political prisoners. Despite these developments, Asad refused to adopt a position of neutrality in the Gulf War and maintained his commitment to support Iran.⁷⁴

The waning years of the Iran-Iraq war were a low point in Syrian-Iranian cooperation. Both states were weak relative to their positions at the outbreak of the war. Asad was still struggling to consolidate his position in Lebanon, the Syrian economy was deteriorating and becoming more dependent on aid from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and Egypt was gradually regaining its prominence in Arab politics. With Egypt's reemergence on the Arab scene in the mid 1980s, Asad's influence and prestige vis-à-vis the other Arab states was diminished and he was forced to make certain concessions in order to prevent Egyptian reintegration into the Arab League. At the 1987 summit in Amman, Asad faced a Kuwaiti threat to suspend its 50 million dollars in annual aid to Syria and the Saudis had also indicated that they might reconsider their 500 million dollars in aid if Asad refused to show a degree of flexibility on core issues. Thus, Asad made gestures towards Iraq and participated in the summit's condemnation of Iran, but refused to budge on the issue of Egyptian reentry.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 209-211.

⁷⁵ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 235-241.

Not only were both states in positions of circumstantial weakness during this period, but the cohesiveness of their relationship was declining. This was largely the result of Iran's cancellation of oil shipments to Syria because of its inability to pay, which forced Asad to seek oil from other sources. Despite their weaknesses and the efforts of other states to draw Syria away from Iran, the war ended in 1988 with their relationship still intact. Asad's dependence on Iran for success in Lebanon, the continuing threat from Israel, and his desire to see Saddam Hussein weakened overshadowed his economic woes and strained relations with the other Arab states. Furthermore, he was aware of Iran's interest in Syria's attempts to prevent the formation of a unified Arab position and was able to take advantage of this dependence by seeking concessions from both sides in the conflict without sustaining any substantial damage.

Israeli and American Efforts

Israeli and American efforts to delink Syria from Iran have been far less aggressive than the efforts by the Arab states during the Iran-Iraq war because they have taken place within a diplomatic context rather than one of war, in which the stakes are naturally higher. Israeli and American efforts have revolved around the Syrian-Israeli peace process and the controversy over Iran's nuclear program. They have been motivated by a desire to weaken Syria's negotiating position, to diminish the influence of Hezbollah and the Palestinian rejectionist organizations, to end the military capabilities of these organizations, and to isolate Iran from its allies in order to encourage its compliance with international nuclear regulations.

In 1991, Hafiz al-Asad demonstrated willingness to participate in bilateral negotiations with Israel. This was an important departure from his previous opposition to any bilateral negotiations between Arab states and Israel and represented a shift in his view of the regional and international structure. For one thing, the collapse of the Soviet Union had left him without a superpower patron and more open to improving his relationship with the United States. Also, he felt that the US and Israel might be more likely to make concessions towards him as a result of his participation in the US led coalition against Saddam Hussein. Furthermore, he had consolidated his position in Lebanon, was enjoying an increased level of international recognition for his role there, and had demonstrated his ability to utilize his connections with Hezbollah to threaten Israeli security. These factors contributed to a self perception of strength and a willingness to enter bilateral negotiations with Israel.

Very little progress was made between Israel and Syria during the years after the Madrid Conference until after the signing of the Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993. At this point, US President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Warren Christopher began to facilitate a dialogue between the Israeli and Syrian negotiating camps to determine what the shape and structure of formal negotiations would be. In May 1995, an “Aims and Principles” document was agreed upon and in June the chiefs of staff of both states met to discuss the next steps in the peace process. These advancements in the process coincided with an increase in clashes in southern Lebanon between Hezbollah fighters and Israeli forces that brought renewed attention to Syria’s relationships with Iran and Hezbollah. On June 23, Syrian Vice President Khaddam went to Iran to discuss the Syrian-Israeli negotiations with Iranian leaders. One of the goals of his visit was to obtain

a pledge from the Iranian regime to end its support of Hezbollah's military activities in the event of a comprehensive peace agreement.⁷⁶ Khaddam's "delicate mission" was apparently unsuccessful as the Iranian state media encouraged Syria to "stand fast against the US pressures."⁷⁷

The parties made little progress through the remainder of the summer as Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was forced to deal with increased domestic resistance to the proposed peace process from Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud opposition and the pressures of an upcoming election. While the Syrian peace negotiations were still on the backburner, Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli hardliner. His successor Shimon Peres, adopted a policy of "flying high and fast" towards a peace settlement, to which Asad responded favorably.⁷⁸ A series of intense negotiations were held between December 1995 and March 1996 during which significant progress was made. The Syrians offered to agree to an unprecedented number of security, political, and economic arrangements if Israel would agree to a complete withdrawal of the Golan to the pre-1967 border.⁷⁹ This was the first time that Asad had demonstrated a willingness to finalize a peace agreement with Israel even before a similar agreement was made with the Palestinians.⁸⁰ Peres caved in to domestic pressures and pulled out of the negotiations in March, and in the May elections, Netanyahu and the Likud party defeated Labor, derailing the peace process for several years.

⁷⁶ Helena Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks, 1991-96 and Beyond* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), 85-86.

⁷⁷ Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks*, 86.

⁷⁸ Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks*, 10.

⁷⁹ Withdrawal to the pre-1967 border gives Syria access to the Sea of Galilee, whereas the internationally recognized (1948) border does not.

⁸⁰ Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks*, 11.

US sponsored peace talks resumed once again in 2000 following a Labor victory in the Israeli Knesset, but were short lived as the result of Hafiz al-Asad's death, George Bush's victory in the presidential elections that year, and the subsequent de-prioritization of the peace process. During the Bush administration, Syrian and Iranian relations with the United States deteriorated over the issues of support for Hezbollah and Hamas, their limited cooperation in Iraq, and Iran's nuclear program. During these years, US policy consisted mainly of efforts to isolate Iran and Syria politically and economically, despite the likelihood that engaging the two states could have benefited US interests in Iraq. These policies failed at isolating the two states from one another and, if anything, encouraged a stronger relationship between them. In 2008, the Turkish government sponsored unsuccessful negotiations between Syria and Israel that were opposed by the US.

Since Barak Obama took office in 2009, US policy toward Syria and Iran has shifted back to a peace process oriented policy. Both Israel and the US have made it clear, however, that Syria's relationship with Iran, particularly within the context of Iran's defiance of international nuclear regulations, will have to be altered to allow for peace. Whether this means cutting ties with Iran completely or just putting an end to arming Hezbollah and Hamas has yet to be determined. In February 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified before the Senate that Syria needs to "begin to move away from the relationship with Iran, which is so deeply troubling to the region as well as to the United States."⁸¹ The day after Clinton's remarks, Bashar al-Asad met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Damascus where they signed a bilateral agreement

⁸¹ Hillary Clinton, "President's Proposed Budget Request for FY2011 for the Department of State and Foreign Operations," Testimony Before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs, February 24, 2010.

cancelling visa restrictions for travel between Iran and Syria in order to demonstrate the strength of their relationship. In May 2010, Asad reported that Israeli President Shimon Peres had offered to engage in open peace negotiations if Syria cuts its ties with Iran and Hezbollah. Asad's response was that "Israel is not interested in peace and there is therefore, nothing more to say."⁸²

Israeli and American efforts to delink Syria from Iran have had no success in the last two decades. The peace negotiations in 1995-96 probably represent the closest that Syria has come to moving away from its alliance with Iran. During this period, the Syrian negotiators believed that Israel would concede the entire Golan Heights to the pre-1967 border as part of a final agreement. It seems that Syria was willing to concede elements of its relationship with Iran, i.e. support of Hezbollah's military activities, in exchange for a favorable resolution of the Golan issue. More recent Syrian-Israeli dialogue has been less promising, however, because Israel has shown more reticence on the issue of Golan withdrawal and has suggested that Syria should move away from Iran as a pre-condition for negotiations.

⁸² "Assad: Peres Promised Open Peace Talks if Syria Cuts Iran Ties," *Haaretz*, May 18, 2010.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

For over thirty years, the Syrian-Iranian alliance has withstood efforts by the Arab states, the Soviet Union, Israel, and the United States to break it apart. The strength of their relationship is largely the product of their dependence on one another to meet their security objectives. Even during times of economic weakness, when defection seemed likely, they were able to overlook their economic needs in order to continue cooperation on security issues.

The question asked at the beginning of the paper was: what does Iran offer Syria that is more important than peace with Israel? At this point, it seems that the alliance with Iran is not necessarily more important than peace with Israel, but that it is more important than any peace with Israel that does not include a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces to the pre-1967 border. This is the standard that has been established by the Syrian regime and anything less would equal defeat. Syria does not necessarily need peace with Israel or the Golan- it has managed just fine without it since 1967. Any peace deal that can be interpreted as a failure or a defeat, however, could be detrimental to the survival of the Syrian regime. Thus, it is unlikely that Syria will give up its relationship with Iran as a precondition to peace negotiations because it would be left without its

principal bargaining tool, and the only likely outcome of the negotiations would be a Syrian defeat.

As things change and develop in the international and regional system, systemic effects will shape the nature of Syria's relationship with Iran, as well as with its other neighbors, including Israel. Domestic changes within Syria, Iran, and Israel will also play an important role. One of the reasons that the 1995-96 negotiations were closer to success than the others was because of the Labor government's unique perceptions of the conflict that made it a more willing participant in the negotiations. Changes in US policy in the region, the situation in Iraq, Lebanese domestic politics, and the status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip will also affect Syrian-Iranian relations in ways that could be unintended and unforeseeable. For example, Israeli or American military action against Hezbollah or Iran at any point in the future could serve to weaken Syria's position by damaging the effectiveness of its alliance with Iran or it could bolster Syria's prestige and anti-imperialist credentials, adding to its strength. Likewise, a final settlement to the Palestinian question could strengthen Syria's position by removing domestic pressure to pursue such a solution as part of a comprehensive peace, or it could weaken Syria by establishing unfavorable precedents or by limiting Syria's ability to pressure Israel through its connections with Palestinian rejectionist organizations. As things stand, the Syrian-Iranian alliance seems unlikely to break in the near future, but the nature of international politics is one of continual change and many possible outcomes.

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